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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 001278

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS AND DRL -- SARAH BUCKLEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/09/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [MY](#)

SUBJECT: PM CHIMES IN ON "ISLAMIC STATE" DEBATE

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 1174 (NAJIB'S ISLAMIC STATE REMARK)

- [1](#)B. KUALA LUMPUR 949 (COURT RULES AGAINST APOSTATE)
- [1](#)C. 06 KUALA LUMPUR 2167 (UMNO EXTENDING MALAY AGENDA)
- [1](#)D. 06 KUALA LUMPUR 1975 (MALAYSIA'S CHINESE MINORITY)
- [1](#)E. 06 KUALA LUMPUR 1516 (RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DEBATE WARNINGS)

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The debate over whether Malaysia is an "Islamic state" continued with Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's August 4 comments that Malaysia is neither a theocratic state nor a secular one. These remarks came as Minister Bernard Dompok broke ranks and stated his disagreement with the description of Malaysia as an Islamic state. Dompok supported the "Merdeka Statement" which calls for Malaysia to use its multicultural and multi-religious diversity to complete Malaysia's political, social, and economic development. Prime Minister Badawi's non-declaration, while still leaving him vulnerable to criticism from the Malay right-wing, is probably the safest route to denying the divisive "Islamic state" issue further energy ahead of general elections. End Summary.

Prime Minister Responds by Taking the Middle Ground

[1](#)2. (U) Debate continues over whether Malaysia is an "Islamic state," following Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak's remarks to this effect on July 17 (ref A). Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who was abroad when the controversy first broke, responded to journalist inquiries on the issue on August 4. Badawi said, "We are not a secular state. We are also not a theocratic state like Iran and Pakistan which PAS (Malaysia's Islamist opposition party) wants us to be, but we are a government that is based on parliamentary democracy." He also noted, "We (the government) consist of leaders from the various religions -- Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity and everyone is involved in discussions to reach a consensus on national development policies."

Minister Breaks Ranks

[1](#)3. (U) Bernard Dompok, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, stated at the launching of the "Merdeka Statement," an civil society-driven agenda for the country's future, that he disagrees with his "colleagues in the government" that Malaysia is an Islamic state. Dompok, a Christian who heads the United Pasok-Momogun Kadazandusun Organization (UPKO, a

Sabah political party), argued that the nation's founders did not intend for Malaysia to be an Islamic state when they created the Malaysian Federation in 1963, after Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore joined with Malaya. One of nine non-Muslim ministers out of 32 total ministers, Dompok is the only Minister to object publicly to the Islamic state claim. Opposition party leader Lim Kit Siang praised Dompok's comments for their "honesty, courage, and conviction in speaking the truth that Malaysia is not an Islamic State."

Merdeka Statement

¶4. (SBU) Forty-two local civil society organizations contributed over a six-month period to the development of the Merdeka (Freedom) Statement, the release of which is timed to coincide with Malaysia's 50th independence anniversary. The wide-range of NGOs includes the Malaysian Bar, the Human Rights Society of Malaysia (HAKAM), the Centre for Independent Journalism, Sisters in Islam, the Council of Malaysian Churches and Education & Research Association for Consumers (ERA Consumer). The Merdeka Statement advocates the government adopt an eight-prong strategy for moving Malaysia forward as a fully developed nation. The core element of the strategy is using Malaysia's multicultural, multilingual, and multi-religious character to advance the country's social, economical, and political development. The Merdeka Statement focuses heavily on the supremacy of the Federal Constitution as "the primary reference point for strengthening national unity," which its drafters see as implicitly backing arguments in favor of Malaysia as a secular state.

Comment

KUALA LUMP 00001278 002 OF 002

¶5. (C) Prime Minister Abdullah's non-declaration, while still leaving him vulnerable to criticism from Malay Muslim conservatives, is probably the safest route to denying the "Islamic State" issue further energy and avoiding divisiveness within the ranks of the National Front government ahead of the general elections. This is consistent with the Prime Minister's approach to the Article 11 controversy last year (ref E). When public debate of Article 11, the freedom of religion clause in Malaysia's Constitution, heated up, Abdullah warned both sides to stop the discussion and took the issue off the table, at least in public forums. The government's heavy influence over the media and other societal controls can restrain the public debate, but leaves the fundamental issue unresolved.

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